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TERMINOLOGY IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Working Group on Toponymic Terminology: report for the period 1989-1992

Submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts
on Geographical Names**

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** Prepared by Naftali Kadmon, Convenor of the Working Group.

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1. The Working Group on Toponymic Terminology was instituted by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its fourteenth session in May 1989, i.e. between two Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The background to the formation of the Working Group is as follows.

2. Working paper No. 4, presented by Israel, referred to United Nations Glossary No. 330, entitled "Technical terminology employed in the standardization of geographical names" (SR/CS/SER.F/330) and listed several problems that required attention. These were (a) precision of formulation of the definitions; (b) uniformity of definitions in the different languages; (c) completeness; and (d) redundancy. A paper submitted by the East, Central and South-East Europe Division (working paper No. 57) also touched upon some of these problems.

3. The Group of Experts therefore decided at its fourteenth session to form a new Working Group to deal with terminology in toponymy (see ESA/RT/C/GN/12, para. 94). The following were named as members of the new Working Group on Terminology: Ms. Kerfoot, Ms. Närhi, and Messrs. Ficor, Gonzales, Hornansky, Lapierre, Lewis, Payne, Raper, Sievers and Spiess, with Mr. Kadmon as Convenor. Work was to be conducted on an English version, with translation into other languages at the second stage. After an initial meeting of the Working Group in May 1989, the Convenor issued a first report to members and asked them to submit their proposals for amendments, additions and deletions of terms and definitions, with 1 November 1989 as first target date. This was later extended to 1 April 1990, by which date a quite extensive body of material had been assembled. Most active had been the Dutch and German-Speaking Division. At a later date further contributions were received from Canada, the United States and Czechoslovakia.

Processing

4. The entire material - the original Glossary No. 330 as well as the contributions mentioned above - was processed by the Convenor, the listings in the original Glossary and the new Dutch and German-Speaking Division's material before the deadline of 1 April 1990, and the later contributions after it.

5. Processing entailed two stages. The first concerned inclusion in the list of terms, and required a preliminary decision on whether a term should be recognized as an independent lexical entry, or appear under a different entry with a cross-reference; or should it be deleted? At the second stage the actual definitions were formulated. This was the more demanding part of the work, since both precision of formulation and brevity had to be aimed at. Furthermore, definitions had to be as wide and inclusive as possible. One of the drawbacks of Glossary No. 330 was the reference of many terms and definitions to Western languages and scripts only, disregarding e.g. syllabic and logographic writing systems or Semitic and South-East Asian languages. This problem was addressed by the Convenor in processing the definitions. In practice, work on both stages outlined above proceeded simultaneously.

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Examples, languages, scripts

6. In dealing with the actual definitions, those in Glossary No. 330 as well as those provided by other contributors, four matters of principle were addressed, viz. precision, brevity, examples, and other languages and scripts. The first two, already mentioned above, were treated together in the formulation of the definitions. In certain cases, brevity had to be sacrificed to clarity and precision.

7. The lack of examples had been another drawback in the past. Therefore, numerous examples have been included in the new Glossary where relevant and necessary. The Convenor, as editor of the Glossary, has introduced examples from the following 16 languages and scripts:

Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), Japanese Kanji and Kana, Polish, Persian (Farsi), Russian Cyrillic, Spanish and Thai.

Target population

8. One question which had to be given attention concerned the target population of the new Glossary. This appears to be composed chiefly of actual or potential users of toponymic guidelines (the preparation and publication of which by member States is strongly advocated by the Group of Experts). Further users would be cartographers, editors of gazetteers, members of names authorities both scientific and administrative, students of toponymy at all levels (whether at courses on the standardization of geographical names or at universities); and other users, including any person interested in place names. The external format of the Glossary was, therefore, to be kept quite traditional and simple.

Production of the draft Glossary

9. In May 1991, the draft of Version 1.1 of the Glossary, produced on an IBM-PC-compatible word-processing system, was sent to the secretariat of the Group of Experts in New York, where it was duplicated and distributed to all members of the Working Group. This was accompanied by a letter requesting the preparation of finalizing remarks for discussion at the Working Group meeting to be held in Geneva in November 1991.

Second meeting of the Working Group

10. A second meeting of the Working Group took place in Geneva on 14 November 1991, during the fifteenth session of the Group of Experts. A number of additional experts attended the meeting. After welcoming the experts present, the Convenor reported on the activity over the past two years and noted that the first goal, as outlined at the fourteenth session in 1989, had indeed been attained, viz., presenting to the fifteenth session a full list of the terms to be included in the new Glossary, and providing the

Working Group members with a copy of Version 1.1 of the complete Glossary, in English.

11. The matter of the extent of the new Glossary was then discussed once more. While one member expressed the opinion that it should be as concise as possible, and another made the observation that many terms invited many errors, still others were of the opinion that a single widely-inclusive dictionary was desirable so that interested persons could find the relevant terms used by toponymists, in all fields, in a single volume. To a member's question as to where the limit of inclusion would be, the Convenor replied that, within reasonable bounds, all terms relating to geographical names appearing in the discussions and publications of the Group of Experts would be eligible for inclusion. A member suggested that the list should be open-ended so that the Glossary could be updated as required. Computer-assisted methods, already employed in producing the draft, would take care of this problem.

12. There was also considerable discussion concerning the terminology to be used for "place name". The Convenor pointed out that the Greek Γη designated not only the planet Earth but also earth (ground) as a common noun, so that "geographical name" would be synonymous with topographic name or toponym. However, another member proposed (and this reflected the preference of the majority) that "geographical name" be used only for features on planet Earth, with "topographic name" (synonym: "toponym") covering names on celestial bodies as well. The proposals "cosmoname" and "astroname" were considered unnecessary. A member voiced the opinion that the Working Group should not invent new terms. "Extraterrestrial name" remains therefore as proposed in the Glossary.

13. The short-term and long-term programme of the Working Group was then outlined, as follows.

Short-term programme

(a) Collecting all further remarks by experts relating to the draft Glossary, these remarks to reach the Convenor by 31 December 1991. That date, agreed by common consent, was later extended to 31 January 1992;

(b) Incorporating all relevant remarks in Version 1.1 and preparing a final version of the first English edition of the new Glossary, to be designated Version 1.2;

(c) Sending Version 1.2 to the secretariat of the Group of Experts in New York for reproduction and distribution to all delegates to the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, to be held in August 1992;

Long-term programme

(d) The Sixth Conference will be asked to extend the term of office of the present Working Group, towards the production of a Multilingual Dictionary

of Toponymic Terminology, by nominating a number of experts, each to be responsible for the translation into one of the remaining official languages of the United Nations;

(e) The United Nations Documentation and Translation Services will be asked to translate the English version into the other five official languages, within an agreed time-frame;

(f) These multilingual versions will then be compared and verified for compatibility by the Working Group members at one or more meetings. Only thus can reasonable conformity be achieved, while retaining relevant linguistic characteristics and usages of each language concerned.

14. The Sixth Conference will also be asked to request the Working Group to periodically review the Glossary and update it as necessary.

Activity since the fifteenth session

15. By 31 January 1992, some further comments and proposals had been received from members, as well as from a former member, Mr. Josef Breu. All relevant material was incorporated in the Glossary. The Convenor then finalized Version 1.2 - in which cross-references are printed in bold type - and, in February 1992, sent it to the secretariat for reproduction and distribution to delegates at the Sixth Conference.

16. Some late proposals were received in March and April 1992. Because of the strict timetable, adhered to in order to ensure distribution at the Sixth Conference, these had to be laid aside for consideration and possible inclusion in a later version.

For maximum effect - the multilingual dictionary

17. It is recommended that work on preparing the multilingual edition of the Glossary should now proceed without delay. This would make the Glossary, in the form of a Multilingual Dictionary of Toponymic Terminology, available to the widest possible circle of users, thus contributing with maximum effect to the standardization of geographical names at national and international level.

18. Therefore, in accordance with the long-term programme (see para. 13 (d)-(f) above), a working paper has been prepared and forwarded to the secretariat for distribution at the Sixth Conference, proposing a draft resolution on this topic to be adopted by the Conference.

19. Widespread distribution and utilization of the Glossary should be aimed at. This will depend greatly on "marketing effort", a point which should be borne in mind at the stage of publication.

Contents of the Glossary

20. In its present form Version 1.2 of the Glossary comprises the following:

Total entries	336
Main entries	198
Synonyms	60
Cross-references	78

21. The Convenor wishes to express his sincere thanks to all those who have contributed their time and professional expertise (under pressure of a tight timetable) towards the preparation of the Glossary, and to the secretariat of the Group of Experts for performing the necessary clerical tasks, timely and with goodwill.